

“Kore in Conflict: Feminist Neo-Pagans Look the Other Way As the God Rapes the Goddess”

Michelle B. Mueller

I. INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World*, Ross Kraemer takes note of the interaction between feminist religious studies scholars researching women in antiquity and living religious traditions. Kraemer writes that feminist academic endeavors venturing into the ancient world, which attempt to uncover realities of women's lives, often threaten views the religious institutions currently hold. Kraemer believes that this problem occurs mostly between scholars of Christianity and the churches, and that the study of Greco-Roman religion is relatively safe. She writes:

...such endeavors are liable to suspicion for the challenge they pose, directly or indirectly, to the truth claims of specific religions. This problem is least acute for the study of pagan Greco-Roman religion, since there are virtually no pagan scholars or practitioners to take offense, and most acute for scholars of Christianity, given the latent, if not active, theological concerns that undergird much research in this field.¹

Kraemer makes a wise statement, of which religious studies scholars of Christianity, and particularly feminist scholars, should be aware. Scholarship affects culture and religiosity. Religious people often turn to religious studies scholars for truth about their own history. While the interaction between scholars and Christian faith communities manifests itself in ways unique to Christianity, such an interaction is not limited to Christianity, or even Christianity and Judaism.

Kraemer is correct that there are *fewer* pagan scholars or practitioners to take offense, but there is a substantial contemporary Neo-pagan, and *feminist Neo-pagan*, community, on which classicists and religious studies scholars have a great impact. The Neo-pagan movement relies heavily on ancient texts for religious inspiration, but classicists' and archaeologists' analyses of ancient texts and ancient religion

¹ Kraemer, 11-12.

are perhaps equally important sources for Neo-paganism. Because Neo-pagans attempt to reconstruct ancient religious practices that were discontinued centuries ago, *scholarship* on religion in antiquity plays a hugely significant role in the history and development of Neo-paganism.

For this reason, Kraemer's comment, "since there are virtually no pagan scholars or practitioners to take offense," immediately caught my attention. Modern Neo-paganism differs from Christianity and Judaism in that it is a *reconstructed* religion, whereas Jewish and Christian denominations have unbroken lineage to and heritage from their ancient origins. Yet, this distinction by no means convinces Neo-pagans that they are disconnected from ancient religion. I do not discredit Kraemer's overall argument in the above passage, regarding the interaction between feminist religious studies scholars and Christians. But, the interaction between scholars and Neo-pagans, particularly Neo-pagan religious leaders and authors, deserves a much closer look.

Kraemer speaks to a situation that is not identical to that which occurs between classical studies scholarship and Neo-paganism. For, Kraemer discusses feminist Christian scholars of faith playing a role on Christian women's religious experience. Feminist scholars' interest in the Virgin Mary, for example, can affect Christian women's relationship to Mary and their understanding of their faith. In the case of Neo-paganism, it is most often secular scholarship (in the fields of classical studies, archaeology, and sometimes religious studies) that influences contemporary religiosity. Studies on women in antiquity become a primary source for people creating Neo-pagan traditions in the 20th century.

In the 1970s ancient Greek religion became attractive to a community of women seeking a religious tradition that matched their feminist politics. The women's spirituality movement, which included Jews, Christians, and women open to new traditions, allied itself with the Neo-pagan

movement that had already reached America.² Wicca continues to be the most well known Neo-pagan denomination, although Wicca is a complex web of divergent traditions in its own right and only one of many other new denominations that claim connections to ancient religion. Neo-pagan traditions have Goddess worship in common. However, Neo-paganism and feminist spirituality, or Goddess spirituality, have separate but connected histories. By the 1970s, Wicca had already begun to spread in America. Before its appearance in the United States, Wiccans and Wiccan covens³ had become public in the United Kingdom. As individuals brought Wicca from the UK to the US, the religion took on a different flavor, merging with American leftist, anti-war politics.⁴ Because worship of a Goddess and a priesthood open to men and women characterized Wicca, the religion has developed alongside feminist politics, and priests and priestesses quickly adapt Wiccan practices to accommodate the latest in feminist theory.⁵

In this essay, I will not discuss Wiccan authors, but some background in Wiccan history will help the reader understand the development of Neo-paganism and the role of feminism within it. The arrival of Wicca from the United Kingdom assisted a spiritual feminist movement that was bound to occur in the 1970s with or without it. Women were challenging most social institutions at the time. Religion, because many denominations did not allow female clergy and because Judaism and Christianity have been flavored by the ancient patriarchal societies from which they emerged, was naturally one such social institution women sought to reform. Feminist women of faith began to critique vocally male leadership and male dominance in Jewish and Christian scripture, liturgies, and congregations. Other

² See Eller, Cynthia. Living in the Lap of the Goddess: the Feminist Spirituality Movement in America. New York: Crossroad, 1993 and Hutton, Ronald. Triumph of the Moon for more detailed historical accounts.

³ A coven is a Wiccan congregation.

⁴ Adler, Margot. Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today. New York: Beacon Press, 1986; Hutton, Ronald. The Triumph of the Moon. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

⁵ To understand better the evolution of feminist theory within Neo-paganism, turn to Starhawk's work. Starhawk. The Spiral Dance. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1989; Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997; and The Twelve Wild Swans: A Journey to the Realm of Magic, Healing, and Action. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001. Starhawk is one voice in the Neo-pagan community, but these three books demonstrate well a changing spiritual tradition in accordance with evolving feminist theory.

women rejected Christianity and sought feminine images of the divine. Whereas Jewish and Christian women decided to explore Sophia and Mary, feminine images of the divine in their tradition of heritage, other women found meaning in the goddesses of ancient Greece, Egypt, Sumer, and other civilizations. The stories of two particular women who turned to the Goddess, Carol Christ and Mary Daly, help articulate the reasons Goddess spirituality developed.

Daly took a radical stand against the Catholic Church and declared that women could not ignore the corruption and oppression of women for which the Church had been responsible. Christ did not take as polemical a stand against the Church as Daly, but both shared the belief that Goddess spirituality was necessary at the moment of their writing because of the benefits it offered women. Daly's mission was to uncover sexism within the Catholic Church and to inspire women to unite against male hegemony.

Christ's essay *Why Women Need the Goddess* explains well the political implications of her theology.⁶ The Goddess was a symbol for women's empowerment. Christ also offers women a rich feminist spiritual tradition, but she does so in a less abrasive manner. Christ provides images of the ancient goddesses so that women may recognize sacredness within themselves. Christ and Daly drew on Greek goddesses in the new mythologies they created. Both were involved with feminists who remained within Judaism and Christianity. Thus, women like Christ and Daly bridged the gap between the 1970s women's spirituality movement and Neo-paganism. Many women in their position did not identify themselves as Neo-pagans; they more frequently used terms such as *Goddess religion* to identify their faith. We must acknowledge those distinctions among spiritual feminists and Neo-pagans because they reveal important historical points in the development of Neo-paganism. Christ, Daly, and others turned to ancient goddesses for a new *women's religion*. Feminist politics (and specifically feminist politics of

⁶ Christ, Carol P. "Why Women Need the Goddess." In Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979, 273-87.

their day, for the feminist movement and feminist theology change rapidly) motivated their religious reformation. In contrast, most Neo-pagans and Wiccans were concerned with gender equality, but it was not always the primary factor in their theology.

Although women in the 1970s Goddess spirituality movement may not have identified themselves as Neo-pagan, I do categorize them under the rubric of Neo-paganism because they make claims about ancient Greek religion and endorse the worship of Greek goddesses. Despite the separateness of the feminist/Goddess spirituality movement and Neo-paganism, they have been linked to some degree all along and, over the years, have influenced one another, becoming somewhat closer to pan-Neo-paganism in America. For example, most Wiccans turn to Starhawk, radical feminist Witch, for inspiration regardless of their location on the political continuum within Wicca. Historians are often more concerned with the distinctions than Wiccans are. I have shared this history mostly because an understanding of it will guide the terminology I use for these separate but co-dependent traditions. Goddess spirituality, Wicca, and Neo-paganism have continued to develop in intertwined paths. The political climate has changed, but the spiritual traditions remain. Much Goddess spirituality literature maintains the same basic premises authors such as Christ and Starhawk put forth in the 1970s.

Women involved in the Goddess spirituality movement are attracted to Greek mythology because of the plethora of female images of the divine, but few deal with the very troubling problems in Greek mythology I would expect to occupy feminist thinkers. Finding female images of the divine has helped many contemporary women feel more connected to a divine presence than they ever did in another congregation. Modern Goddess spirituality validates and honors womanhood, when women in some other traditions still do not have the right to serve as clergy. Yet, ancient Greece was a patriarchal

society, and Greek mythology reflects it. A common belief among Neo-pagans is that Goddess worship is inherently a feminist practice. Ancient history does not support this claim.

There has been a move within the Goddess spirituality and Neo-pagan movements to imagine a pre-patriarchal world, a matrifocal society that preceded Greek culture as historians know it, and to thus ignore the evidence that links ancient Greek religion to its actual cultural context. As a result, Neo-pagans often do not engage critically with the ancient material they claim to be the foundation of their religion. Greek mythology, in actuality, contains story after story, in which a god, most frequently Zeus, rapes a goddess, a mortal woman, a young boy, or an animal. I should think that violent rapes in one's chosen religious mythology should concern a spiritual feminist deeply. Instead of directly dealing with the implications of a god's rape of a goddess, Neo-pagans retell the myths as pleasant stories, in which goddesses always have agency and are never victims of violence or rape.

The myth of Persephone's descent to the Underworld is one example of a Greek myth, in which a god, Hades, rapes a goddess, Persephone. Hades, the Lord of the Underworld, conspires with Zeus, the ruler of the Olympian gods and also Persephone's father. Zeus approves Hades' plan to make Persephone his bride. Before she becomes Hades' stolen bride, Persephone lives with her mother, the goddess Demeter, on the Earth. Demeter is responsible for agriculture and fertility of the Earth. Persephone shares some of Demeter's agricultural powers. Her leave from and return to Demeter result in winter and spring. Hades rises in a chariot from the Underworld and abducts Persephone violently. No one has warned Persephone or prepared her for a wedding. Persephone experiences shock at first, but eventually adjusts to her new identity as Queen of the Underworld.

When Neo-pagans retell the Persephone myth, few accept that rape is a part of the myth. They rewrite the story so that Persephone chooses to descend to the Underworld. If they include Hades in the

plot, they pay attention only to the points in the ancient narrative that suggest that Persephone has embraced her role as Hades' wife. Instead of raising theological questions about what it means that a god rapes a goddess, feminist Neo-pagans look the other way. Desiring a religious mythology that does not include male violence against females, they rewrite the ancient myths to fit their intentions. Feminist Neo-pagans have not answered the question, *What does it mean that the gods are serial rapists?*

Charlene Spretnak and Jennifer Reif are two feminist Neo-pagan authors, who have rewritten the myth of Persephone's descent. Spretnak, directly involved in the 1970s women's spirituality movement, wrote *Lost Goddess of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre-Hellenic Myths* in 1978. Her rewriting of the myth of Persephone's descent directly reflects her location in this movement, for she writes about goddesses and for women. Spretnak's purpose is to provide *women* with meaningful religious symbols. Jennifer Reif wrote *Mysteries of Demeter: Rebirth of the Pagan Way* in 1999. Reif believes that "Demetrian Paganism," the term she uses for the religious tradition she has created, is especially positive for women because they find less powerful images of the divine feminine in Judaism and Christianity, the most common faiths of origin for converts to Neo-paganism. Both Spretnak and Reif write for women; Reif writes for men also. On the political continuum of Neo-paganism, Spretnak resides towards the more radical feminist end, while Reif tries harder to reach men as well. Their political locations shape the content of their narratives.

In their retellings of the myth, Jennifer Reif makes the god Hades Persephone's loving partner; Spretnak eliminates Hades from the myth altogether. In the original myth, Hades takes Persephone as his bride via a violent abduction. Reif and Spretnak both retell their stories to erase the violence. Reif does so by changing Hades' character. Spretnak removes him and frames her story around the goddesses Persephone and Demeter. The abduction scene is an integral part of the myth's plot in all of its ancient

versions. The events that follow are all direct consequences of Hades' abduction of Persephone. In the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, Persephone's mother Demeter searches for her missing daughter in desperation and rages against the god Zeus when she learns that he had endorsed Persephone's abduction.

The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* is the most archaic literary source for the myth of Persephone's descent. The Homeric Hymns are a collection of devotional Greek hymns with narrative structures. The Hymns begin with a song for the deity and then proceed to tell a story about that deity. Because this Homeric Hymn is dedicated to Demeter, she is a main character throughout. Fortunately, the narrator of the *Hymn* does not remain by Demeter's side throughout the entire story. The *Hymn* describes Hades' abduction of Persephone and their time together in the Underworld.

Fuller analyses of the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, Jennifer Reif's, and Charlene Spretnak's versions will follow in this essay. For now, in this discussion about modern Goddess spirituality and Neo-pagan history (and Reif's and Spretnak's location within that history), it is most important to note the common driving force behind Reif's and Spretnak's narratives and their approaches to the abduction or rape scene. Both authors retell the story to exclude divine violence. In every ancient version, however, Hades seizes Persephone aggressively. Classicists have interpreted this moment of rape or abduction in many ways, which I will illuminate in my first chapter. Many, in weighing a variety of evidence within and outside of the texts (archaeological records and social history), conclude that the rape is a metaphor for a girl's initiation into womanhood. The violence, then, is an essential part of the narrative because it demonstrates the difficulties of growing up. But, Reif and Spretnak want a goddess who is always independent and never a victim of rape.

Reif and Spretnak select only certain evidence from the ancient world (or certain modern scholarship about the ancient world) to communicate to their readers. Reif and Spretnak have decided what type of story they wish to abstract from the myth (Reif wants a romance; Spretnak desires a story about the bonds between women). They then ignore the fact that the god violently rapes the goddess in every ancient written version of the myth because it does not belong in a pleasant story.

II. SUMMARY OF THE ANCIENT PERSEPHONE MYTH

The ancient literary sources for the myth of Persephone's descent include the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* (seventh century B.C.E.)⁷; Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti* (first century C.E.); Apollodorus' *The Library* (second century C.E.); and Claudian's *The Rape of Proserpina*⁸ (late fourth century C.E.). Many interpreters have taken The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* to be the most authoritative, either because of its age or its attractive narrative style. Each of the above versions contains an abduction scene, whereby Hades (also called Pluto), the god of the Underworld, captures Kore (or Persephone), carries her off to the Underworld, and assumes her as his bride. The goddess's name *Kore* literally means *Maiden*, and is a significant feature in how the story has been read. In the Homeric *Hymn*, the name Persephone appears in the text only after she enters the Underworld.⁹ This name change then lends credence to the theory that the abduction in actuality represents a change in status, either a rite of passage into womanhood or the acceptance of new powers as Queen of the Underworld. The abduction is violent in all of the above versions. Persephone innocently plays in flower-filled fields with nymphs and other divine maidens; Hades arrives in a chariot and snatches the unsuspecting maiden.

⁷ Scholars disagree over the *Hymn's* date. According to Foley, scholars generally believe the date to be between 650 and 550 B.C.E. Foley, Helene P. *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, 29.

⁸ *Proserpina* is another name for the goddess *Persephone*.

⁹ HHymn, line 337.

Many classicists have negotiated with the story in order to find a positive meaning behind Persephone's abduction.¹⁰ Those interpretations include reading the myth as an allegory for the seasons (winter occurs because the Earth goddess Demeter mourns the loss of her daughter Persephone and withholds her powers of agricultural fertility)¹¹; as a metaphor for a girl's initiation into womanhood (an initiation which is terrifying at first but which ends in a higher social status for the new woman); and as an exaggeration of ancient Athenian wedding rituals (it is known that the wedding rites often included a "mock abduction," which demonstrated the changing status of the bride and the mystery facing her as she enters marriage¹²). Each of these interpretations offers an interesting way to read the narrative, in its ancient context. However, I am primarily interested in what modern women do with this myth, how they internalize or do not internalize Persephone's rape, and how they justify a religious story, in which a god rapes a goddess.

Jennifer Reif and Charlene Spretnak each retell the myth, proclaiming that their versions maintain strong connections to the original. Now, there are many aspects of the myth on which one could focus, including the relationship between Demeter and Persephone, the joyfulness of their annual reunion, and the correlation to the seasons. But (and perhaps *because* I am a feminist reader of Classical myth) the violence of the rape scene never passes me by without demanding a closer look. I am deeply curious about how Reif and Spretnak retell the relationship between Hades and Persephone without a rape scene and still claim a connection to the myth. Since classicists have already discussed the meaning of the abduction scene, and a few have interpreted it as a metaphor for the average Greek wedding, we

¹⁰ In recent years, feminist classicists have approached the myth, but many interpretations (such as the allegorical interpretation of seasons) predate the "second wave" feminist movement.

¹¹ Mannhardt, Wilhelm. *Wald- & Feldkulte*. Berlin, 1875.

¹² See Oakley, John Howard and Rebecca H. Sinos. *The Wedding in Ancient Athens*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993 and Redfield, James M. *The Locrian Maidens: Love and Death in Greek Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

must examine the details of the myth ourselves before we conclude how essential the rape is and what we believe it means for the goddess.

While each of these versions is significant, the Homeric *Hymn* is the oldest and most frequently cited by Reif and Spretnak. In the following few pages, I will identify moments in the Homeric *Hymn* that are most relevant to a discussion about Persephone's status as a victim or as a free agent. This discussion will assist the following analysis of Reif and Spretnak's versions, for Persephone is very much a free agent in both.

A problem in discussing the Homeric *Hymn*, or any of the other ancient versions for that matter, is that so much of what we think we know about the myth is contestable. For example, scholars do not agree on the date of the *Hymn* or its relationship to the Eleusinian Mysteries.¹³ One must also of course deal with issues of translation. In this case, the verb *αρπάζειν* poses a challenge in translation. Greek scholars have translated the verb as *to rape*, *to seize*, or *to capture*. Aggression is common throughout each definition, but, in contemporary feminist discourse, *rape* has so much meaning attached to it, we take risks by confusing all aggressive acts with *rape*. Because the myth has so often been translated as *The Rape of Persephone*, it is nearly impossible to free oneself of that association. In my discussion, I will refer to Hades' seizure of Persephone as the *rape scene* or *abduction scene* alternatively, but the reader should be aware that, in either case, I refer to the same moment.

The scene is one of a violent capture through which Hades forces a young woman to be his bride. The sexual implications of the scene are debatable. The Homeric *Hymn* does not indicate at what moment Hades and Persephone consummate their relationship, though classicists do attempt to read

¹³ The Eleusinian Mysteries were ancient rites in honor of Demeter and Persephone. See Clay and Foley for discussions on their connection to the *Hymn*.

certain symbolic acts (such as Persephone's picking of the narcissus¹⁴ and her later eating of the pomegranate in the Underworld¹⁵) as sexual metaphors. Each reader may have a specific idea of what defines rape. Because we cannot be sure which definition of rape precisely applies to Hades' abduction of Persephone, I advise the reader to keep in mind that *violence motivated by sexual or romantic intent* lies at the heart of the abduction. *In as much as sexually motivated violence defines rape, Hades rapes Persephone.*

Throughout this essay, when I discuss the initial meeting of Hades and Persephone, I will label it *the moment of contact*. An analysis of this moment in each of the Homeric *Hymn*, Reif, and Spretnak will be of the utmost importance, for my argument centers around the presence or absence of rape. Thus, acknowledging *the moment of contact* as a specific theme recurring throughout the texts will be essential in a comparison between them. My analysis of Spretnak, surprisingly, revolves around the fact that there is no such *moment of contact*; the reader will not find Hades anywhere in Spretnak's retelling. Yet, Hades' absence represents Spretnak's rejection of the *moment of contact* because of the ancient myth's violence. Whereas Reif adjusts Hades' violent nature and creates a love story, complete with a romantic, consensual moment of contact, Spretnak gives up on his character and tells a tale of Persephone's descent that lacks any moment of contact with Hades.

The moment of contact in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* is a violent, nonconsensual abduction scene:

The girl [Kore] marveled and stretched out both hands at once / to take the lovely toy [flower]. The earth with its wide ways yawned / over the Nysian plain; the lord Host-to-Many rose up on her / with his immortal horses, the celebrated son of Kronos; / he snatched the unwilling maid into his golden chariot / and led her off lamenting. She screamed with a shrill voice, / calling on her father, the son of Kronos highest and best.¹⁶

¹⁴ HHymn, line 16.

¹⁵ HHymn, lines 371-74.

¹⁶ HHymn, lines 15-21.

The narrator describes a scene in which Hades violently abducts Kore, unsuspecting; Kore immediately responds fearfully and screams for help (ironically from her father, who acted as Hades' accomplice, unbeknownst to Kore). In the Homeric *Hymn*, Hades, and not Persephone, premeditates their union; he seizes her without consent. The narrative continues, "Against her will Hades took her by the design of Zeus / with his immortal horses—her father's brother, / Commander- and Host-to-Many, the many-named son of Kronos."¹⁷ Here, the narrative not only reaffirms that Hades abducted Kore against her will, but also exposes the extreme patriarchal order behind Kore's rape.

Zeus (who is the son of Kronos, father of Persephone, brother of Hades, and the chief ruler of all the Olympian gods) has arranged this marriage. In this manner, Hades' marriage to Persephone corresponds to other Greek weddings arranged between father and groom. That Zeus and Hades had agreed to the union prior to the event is not unusual. But, the violence of this scene exaggerates the unruliness of such arranged marriages, for no one ever warns Kore that her wedding is near nor informs her of her future husband's identity. Furthermore, Zeus does not consult with Kore's mother Demeter regarding the proposed marriage. The Homeric *Hymn* does not romanticize the union of Hades and Persephone at their moment of contact, unless the narrator intentionally writes for an audience that fetishizes male violence.

Kore's discontent extends beyond the initial moment of surprise. As Hades brings Kore into her new home, the Underworld, Kore longs for her mother. During the transition, Kore does not feel pleased with her new husband, "So long as the goddess gazed on earth and starry heaven, / on the sea flowing strong and full of fish, / and on the beams of the sun, she still hoped / to see her dear mother and the race

¹⁷ HHymn, lines 30-32.

of immortal gods. / For so long hope charmed her strong mind despite her distress.”¹⁸ Kore now exists in a state of mixed hope, longing, and distress. Maintaining hope is often perceived as a strong characteristic. A character who does not lose faith in a time of crisis may have the endurance she needs to surpass the tragedy or to acclimate herself to the unexpected situation. In that case, Kore, although a rape victim, is still a strong character.

The Homeric *Hymn* perceives Persephone as a victim of rape, but also much more. In the conclusion of the *Hymn*, Persephone makes peace with the past and takes pride in the new honors she receives as Queen of the Underworld. A question one could ask of the three texts (the *Hymn*, Reif’s, and Spretnak’s retellings) naturally follows. *Which is a more feminist act: to reclaim a female literary figure and re-present her as strong and independent, without any traces of patriarchal oppression in her life, or to remember such a figure’s tragedy and to pay homage to her as a rich, versatile character with complicated life experiences?* Reif and Spretnak choose the former.

In her popular commentary *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive Essays*, Helene Foley, a classicist and philologist, argues that the Homeric Hymn is sympathetic towards oppressed women and makes a statement against patriarchal society in ancient Greece. To support this claim, Foley points to the pomegranate scene, the narrator’s sympathy for Demeter while she mourns, and the conclusion of the Hymn, whereby Demeter and Zeus do negotiate, and Demeter and Persephone receive honors. For Foley, the Homeric *Hymn* is already a feminist text. Although the narrative portrays a situation in which a male forces his bride into marriage, Foley believes that the narrative itself, because of the characters with whom the Hymn sympathizes, does not condone the situation. Foley writes:

¹⁸ HHymn, lines 33-37.

Thus, although from the male perspective Hades' abduction is entirely acceptable, the *Hymn* thus takes apart the benign cultural institution we see functioning apparently without tension on earth and shows the price paid by mother and daughter in accepting for the first time a marriage that requires a degree of separation and subordination to the male unfamiliar in the divine world.¹⁹

Thus, for Foley, Hades' violent abduction of Kore is an essential point of the myth. The difference between Helene Foley and the Neo-pagan authors I will discuss later, Reif and Spretnak, is that Foley includes the rape in the story and finds a feminist perspective within the text already.

Besides the abduction scene, another important plot element is Persephone's eating of the pomegranate. According to the story, Persephone's consumption of the pomegranate binds her to the Underworld. Because she has eaten food of the dead, she must return annually and is forever marked as Queen of the Underworld. However, it is unclear in the Homeric *Hymn* whether Persephone ate the fruit knowingly or not. The *Hymn* includes two accounts of Persephone's consumption: the narrator's²⁰ and that which Persephone tells Demeter later²¹.

After Zeus concedes to Demeter's protestations that Persephone should return, Hades, without fighting, follows the higher order. He urges the young bride, "Go, Persephone, to the side of your dark-robed mother."²² But, Hades gives Persephone a token before she leaves him, "But he gave her to eat / a honey-sweet pomegranate seed, stealthily passing it / around her, lest she once more stay forever / by the side of revered Demeter of the dark robe."²³ The text does not indicate clearly whether or not Persephone understood the implications of the pomegranate. The word λαθρη, translated above as "stealthily" appears again in the second account, but Persephone adds new details not present in the

¹⁹ Foley, 109.

²⁰ HHymn, lines 371-74.

²¹ HHymn, lines 406-16.

²² HHymn, line 360.

²³ HHymn, lines 370-74.

former description. After she has reunited with Demeter, who enquires if she had eaten anything from the Underworld, Persephone cries:

I will tell you the whole truth exactly, Mother. / The Slayer of Argos came to bring fortunate news / from my father, the son of Kronos, and the other gods / and lead me from Erebus so that seeing me with your eyes / you would desist from your anger and dread wrath / at the gods. Then I leapt up for joy, but he stealthily / put in my mouth a food honey-sweet, a pomegranate seed, / and compelled me against my will and by force to taste it. / For the rest—how seizing me by the shrewd plan of my father, / Kronos's son, he carried me off into the earth's depths— / I shall tell and elaborate all that you ask.²⁴

The reader must then question which account is more accurate. Although the narrator admits that Hades uses stealth to feed Persephone the pomegranate seed, the narrator does not suggest that Hades force-fed Persephone, which is what she later tells her mother. About this contradiction, Helene Foley writes:

The poem has already made a striking move from social to psychological reality by making the bride a figure who actively mediates between mother and husband, rather than a figure who mediates (often passively, as a gift from one man to another) between father and husband. As noted above, to the degree that Persephone represents her eating of the pomegranate as force-feeding, the text opens the possibility that she is adapting the story for her mother's benefit; alternatively, the poem suggestively endows her with speech and subjectivity at the moment that she has come into her mature identity as a figure who eternally moves from one sphere of the cosmos and from one powerful adult to another.²⁵

Foley's interpretation here is very interesting. Foley does not perceive Persephone as a rape victim who remains a victim. Instead, Foley emphasizes Persephone's "speech," "subjectivity," and newfound "mature identity." Persephone chooses to tell her mother the story of the pomegranate, as she believes her mother would like to hear it. Persephone now acts as active mediator between her husband and mother. Foley's interpretation suggests that, although Hades did abduct Persephone unwillingly, Persephone has now embraced her new role as Queen of the Underworld and as Hades' wife.

²⁴ HHymn, lines 406-16.

²⁵ Foley, 131.

Many have detected symbols in the text that hint at Kore's readiness for sexuality. Again, the rape is then an initiation, an initiation into adult sexuality. That a story in which a violent act represents the archetypal introduction to sexuality for all women displeases me. Despite the glaring problems, some feminist classicists have emphasized this aspect of the myth. The scenes that suggest Kore's readiness are her picking of the narcissus in the *Hymn*'s beginning, Demeter's absence, and the pomegranate scene. The arguments behind these ideas rely on the speculated meanings of the symbols, the narcissus and the pomegranate, outside of the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. The giving of a pomegranate or another fruit indicated sexual interest.²⁶ By accepting the gift, Persephone then conveys a returned interest.

Commenting on the opening scene, Foley writes:

Yet the presence of other females and the physical separation of mother and daughter at the time of the rape suggest something more than a paternal intervention in a blissful infantile unity with the mother. The adolescent girl's attraction to the seductive narcissus and the location of the rape in the flowery meadow (where such divine rapes typically occur) suggest Persephone's readiness for a new phase of life.²⁷

This interpretation agrees with Spretnak's and Reif's versions in that Persephone is *ready* for her descent. In the Homeric *Hymn*, Persephone does not verbalize that she feels ready. She may not be aware of what she chooses. But, Foley argues that Persephone is ready for a change, whether or not she understands what comes next.

The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* concludes in a compromise reached between Demeter and Zeus, Persephone's temporary return to the Earth and to her mother Demeter, and the establishment of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Because Persephone has eaten pomegranate seeds in the Underworld, she is eternally bound to the realm of the dead. But, Persephone will move between her native land and new realm every year, spending spring on the Earth and winter in the Underworld. In the progression towards

²⁶ Faraone, Chris. *Ancient Love Magic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, ch 2.3.

²⁷ Foley, 127.

this compromise, the narrator of the *Hymn* develops Hades' character. We do not hear Hades' speech until he responds to the request that he let Persephone leave him.²⁸ After Demeter petitions Zeus, Zeus sends Hermes to "wheedle Hades with soft words / and lead back holy Persephone from the misty gloom / into the light to join the gods so that her mother might see her with her eyes and desist from anger."²⁹ The narrator's description of Hermes' purpose convinces the reader that persuading Hades will prove a difficult task. Otherwise, "wheedling with soft words" would not be necessary. Yet, Hades lets Persephone leave surprisingly easily.

When Hermes delivers Zeus's message and informs Hades of Demeter's terrible anger³⁰. Hades submits to the higher order and responds politely:

Thus he [Hermes] spoke and Aidoneus [Hades], lord of the dead, smiled / with his brows, nor disobeyed king Zeus's commands. / At once he urged thoughtful Persephone: / "Go, Persephone, to the side of your dark-robed mother, / keeping the spirit and temper in your breast benign. / Do not be said and angry beyond the rest; / in no way among immortals will I be an unsuitable spouse, / myself a brother of father Zeus. And when you are there, / you will have power over all that lives and moves, / and you will possess the greatest honors among the gods. / There will be punishment forevermore for those wrongdoers / who fail to appease your power with sacrifices, / performing proper rites and making due offerings." / Thus he spoke and thoughtful Persephone rejoiced.³¹

After he receives the higher order, Hades lets Persephone go. He simultaneously does whatever is in his power to make the role of his wife appealing. One could read Hades' speech several ways. Hades may genuinely wish Persephone to return to her mother's side because he now realizes how much grief he has caused Demeter. Or, Hades may act as a strategist, offering honors to Persephone and expressing concern for her mother so that he will continue to have her as a bride.

²⁸ HHymn, lines 360-69.

²⁹ HHymn, lines 336-40.

³⁰ HHymn, line 354.

³¹ HHymn, lines 357-70.

Immediately after this passage follows the scene in which Hades gives Persephone a pomegranate seed to eat. As I discussed above, the pomegranate scene is confusing. The modern reader is unsure the actual details of this exchange. Did Hades give or force-feed Persephone the pomegranate? Did Persephone understand the implications of the pomegranate? Many interpreters have chosen to believe one of these possibilities. I have not reached any one conclusion about Hades' character. But, I wish to convey that one could recognize Hades as a loving partner because of his speech and the honors he promises Persephone. This granting of honors has supported classicists' interpretations that the myth describes a woman's rite of passage that is ultimately in her best interest. Persephone's new honors also agree with the hypothesis that Hades and Persephone form a loving divine couple. Their eventual happiness overrides their rocky start. Falling for Hades, Persephone forgets his initial aggression, or she understands why he abducted her and forgives him.

Helene Foley points out the changed characters and roles of both Hades and Persephone at this point in the narrative, in opposition to the opening scene:

Persephone will receive honors as the wife of Hades; Demeter accepts additional honors from Zeus. The goddesses will preside together over the Mysteries. The text strongly contrasts the initial helplessness of Demeter, who searches for Persephone in ignorance and then cannot reach her daughter in the world below, with the final powerful strike that wins new honors from Zeus, and the initial helplessness of Persephone, a victim of rape and an unwilling bride, with the powerful rule of the underworld that she will acquire.³²

Foley emphasizes the power Persephone has attained through her relationship with Hades. Although the god initially abducted her, a helpless young girl, with force, Persephone has now become a strong and powerful goddess. For Foley, the ends might justify the means. The rape is a metaphor for Persephone's transformation. Reif and Spretnak, the modern feminist Neo-pagans, agree with Foley's sentiment, for they tell the tale of a goddess who becomes independent and builds character through her decision to

³² Foley, 126.

descend to the Underworld. All three feminist interpreters value the power Persephone accepts and employs as Queen of the Underworld. They disagree over Persephone's initial choice in the event.

Another element of the myth important in any feminist analysis is the deep bond between mother and daughter, Demeter and Persephone. This relationship between Demeter and Persephone and the sole fact that two female characters are central to the plot have probably been the largest reasons why this myth appeals to feminists (classicists and Neo-pagans), despite the problematic rape scene. In fact, Charlene Spretnak realigns the Persephone myth, placing her relationship to Demeter at the center of the myth, whereas other authors (Reif, Ovid, and Apollodorus) locate Persephone's relationship to Hades in the center. Out of all the ancient versions, the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* puts the most importance on Demeter's part in the myth. One finds an obvious explanation for this emphasis in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*'s purpose. Each Homeric Hymn is dedicated to one god or goddess. The *Hymn* expresses devotion to both Demeter and Persephone, for both receive honors in the hymn, but the primary recipient is Demeter. Thus, one could attribute Demeter's great role simply to the structural purpose of this hymn. However, a feminist Neo-pagan, who uses this version as a primary source for the myth, may not always concern herself with issues such as its "structural purpose."³³ What matters here is that the relationship between Demeter and Persephone *is* a main theme in the Homeric *Hymn*, one of the many sources, and often the most important, for Neo-pagans.

When Reif and Spretnak retell the story, they absolutely exclude any traces of rape. Reif and Spretnak each introduce their versions of the myth with justifications for their retellings' lack of rape, based on archaeological evidence (the Locrian *pinakes* in Reif) and secondary scholarship (theories of matriarchy in Spretnak). Foley, Reif, and Spretnak all respond to the myth with feminist perspectives

³³ Were feminist Neo-pagans always concerned with the same issues classicists are, they may also hesitate to rely on Ovid as a religious source. Ovid's purpose in retelling the myths is unclear. Desire to entertain probably drove Ovid more than religious devotion.

and objectives. Their feminist agenda ultimately manifests in two radical alternatives. Reif and Spretnak choose to “make nice.” Because they offer their versions of the myth to women seeking spiritual fulfillment and connection to a strong divine feminine figure, Reif and Spretnak demand a myth in which the goddess Persephone has full agency and, if the god appears, he be a gentle, loving partner.

In both Reif and Spretnak’s retellings, Persephone chooses to descend to the Underworld. Reif portrays Hades as a loving partner; Spretnak removes Hades from the story altogether. In this manner, Reif and Spretnak rewrite the myth so that it is not about rape in order for modern women to worship Persephone without strings attached. Because Reif and Spretnak have removed rape from the plot, modern worshippers do not need to think further about what it means when god rapes goddess. Foley, in contrast, takes just as much a feminist stance when she decides not to discard the rape scene, for she explains how the Homeric Hymn to Demeter illuminates the problems the patriarchal marriage pattern causes for women. The Homeric Hymn may not be a gentle, peaceful story, but that is exactly where Foley finds merit. The narrative includes moments of violence, terror, loss, and grief, but also reunion and negotiation. Foley challenges the notion that, in a feminist story, all female characters should be strong and independent at all times. The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* is a feminist narrative in as much as it demonstrates a sad reality for women during the time of its writing and suggests that these realities are unjust. The Homeric *Hymn* does not sweep injustices under the carpet, which is essentially what Reif and Spretnak do when they exclude rape.

III. THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JENNIFER REIF

Background: Jennifer Reif's Method

In *Mysteries of Demeter: Rebirth of the Pagan Way*, Jennifer Reif presents research on ancient Greek religion, specifically worship of Demeter; her own retelling of the myth of Persephone's descent; and modern liturgies that she bases on ancient festivals, but that address current needs.³⁴ These features included in Reif's book are representative of Neo-pagan literature. Chapters covering religious history, retellings of ancient myths, and modern liturgies usually comprise one Neo-pagan text. In the liturgical section, Reif provides reconstructed rituals for the Eleusinian Mysteries, Stenia, Kalligenia, Thesmophoria, Haloa, and other festivals ancient Greeks celebrated in honor of Demeter. A thorough analysis of Reif's sources for those liturgies would be fascinating and would provide further insight into the *creation* of Neo-pagan tradition. Classical studies scholars have made many attempts to uncover the events of the Eleusinian Mysteries. We will never truly *know* all the details of the rituals. This lack of knowledge does not deter Neo-pagans from creating rituals modeled after the Eleusinian Mysteries or other alluring ancient rites. Neo-pagans collect what evidence they can about ancient rites, meditate on their congregants' current needs, and compose new rituals that best reflect their research and their goals.

A study of Reif's liturgies would be interesting in its own right. But, what should concern the reader most at the present moment is Reif's retelling of the Persephone myth because we find the rape scene in the ancient *narratives*. Reif's version, which she titles, "The Myth of Demeter and Her Holy Daughter," rests between chapter two, "The Temple at Eleusis and Its Clergy" and chapter four "Theology and Spiritual Themes." In chapter two, Reif pulls together information from George Mylonas, Carl Kerényi, Kevin Clinton, and other archaeologists and classical

³⁴ Reif, Jennifer. *Mysteries of Demeter: Rebirth of the Pagan Way*. York Beach: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1999.

studies scholars, who have reported the findings from the sanctuary at Eleusis. Then after she retells the myth, Reif discusses its *spiritual meaning* for the modern practitioner in chapter four. With this order of information, Reif first grounds her tradition in the ancient world and then applies ancient ritual and myth to modern lives. A “spiritual theme” important to Reif is the initiatory transformation she, and many classicists, believe Persephone to undergo when the goddess descends to the Underworld. Reif reads this rite of passage as particularly relevant to women’s lives, just as classicists have done. Some fear of the unknown usually accompanies rites of passage and initiatory experiences.³⁵ Reif writes that Persephone feels fear as she leaves her home and journeys to the Underworld, but Persephone leaves of her own volition. Persephone’s will is vitally important in Reif’s narrative, as well as in Spretnak’s and many other Neo-pagan versions.³⁶

Instead of a tale including male violence against a female, Reif writes a romantic love story. It is clear that, although Reif’s retelling may be grounded in ancient³⁷ sources, she is a creative author,

³⁵ In a recent reader, several scholars have reconsidered van Gennep’s and Mircea Eliade’s popular work on the initiation model. See Dodd, David B. and Christ A. Faraone. *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives: New Critical Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

³⁶ For other Neo-pagan treatments of Persephone, see Budapest, Zsuzsanna. *The Holy Book of Women’s Mysteries*. Oakland, CA: Wingbow Press, 1997, 147-53; Farrar, Janet and Stewart. “Chapter XIII: Demeter and Persephone.” In *The Witches’ Goddess*. Blaine, WA: Phoenix Publishing, 1987, 85-95; and Kaldera, Raven and Tannin Schwartzstein. “The Story of Hades and Persephone.” In *Handfasting and Wedding Ritual: Inviting Hera’s Blessing*. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 2003, 115-20. In her section about the Thesmophoria, Stenia, Skira, Haloa, and Eleusinian Mysteries (all ancient rituals in honor of Demeter and Kore), Z Budapest does not mention Hades or Hades’ rape of Persephone (147-53). The Farrars do include an abduction scene in their theatric “The Demeter and Persephone Ritual” (90-95), but they adhere to the mock abduction wedding theory. Introducing the liturgy, the Farrars write, “Persephone, during her annual sojourns with Hades, was no prisoner but acknowledged Queen of the Underworld” (88). For the ritual performance, the Farrars instruct Wiccans to reenact the abduction scene, “Persephone makes up her mind and plucks the flower. While she is smelling and admiring it, Hades quietly picks up his athame, opens the gateway, lays down his athame and creeps round behind her... Suddenly Hades seizes Persephone from behind, pulls her to her feet and hustles her through the gateway out of the Circle. While Persephone looks around, wondering where she is, Hades picks up his athame and closes the gateway. Then he turns to Persephone” (92). The athame is a ceremonial knife or sword used in Wiccan ritual. The Farrars impose a modern symbol, complete with its meaning in a Wiccan context, onto their reenactment of Greek myth. At least in the Farrars’ case, they acknowledge that an abduction occurred, but the abduction does not challenge their belief that Persephone wanted to leave with Hades. Hades seizes Persephone and whisks her off, but there is a mutual understanding between them already. Kaldera and Schwartzstein make Hades and Persephone models for a marrying couple. This move follows a similar pattern that Redfield argues happened in ancient Locris.

³⁷ Reif, 25.

mythmaker, and religious leader. Reif's narrative is not a translation of the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, nor of Ovid. It is a modern feminist text, whose author finds inspiration from Greek mythology and rewrites a story she believes to be more positive. The interaction between Persephone and Hades begins with Persephone acting towards Hades, an element unfamiliar in Ovid and the Homeric *Hymn*.

After the first sentence in her retelling, Reif includes a footnote, in which she describes her creative process in mythmaking:

This tale of Demeter and Persephone attempts to revive the myth as it was used in Eleusis. The story of mother and daughter takes place within the cycle of the grain, and pivotal points of this cycle become the Demetrian Wheel of the Year. "Stealing the bride," or *klepsigamia*, takes place without rape, though many aspects of the classical version are here. The myth encompasses the mysteries and, as in Homer, it ends with their origin in Eleusis. This version of the myth excludes the rape of the maiden by the God of the Underworld, as seen in Ovid's *Death of Proserpina* and in those writers who borrowed from him³⁸....Some of the texts that influenced the reconstruction of this composite myth were: *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, ...*The Orphic Hymns: Text, Translation and Notes* by A. Athanassakis; *Hesiod and Theognis*, ...*The Road to Eleusis* by Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck; Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*...; *The Greek Myths*, vol. I, Robert Graves; *The Attic Festivals of Demeter and their Relation to the Agricultural Year*, Allaire Chandon Brumfield; and *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries*, George Mylonas."³⁹

Here, Reif discloses the basic processes involved in creating Neo-pagan tradition. She discusses the specific research she conducted for her book on modern "Demetrian Paganism."⁴⁰ But, the reader should understand that other Neo-pagans would conduct similar studies in order to retell any ancient myth or to reconstruct ancient rites. Reif's passage above communicates the *sources* of Neo-paganism. Although Reif identifies the ancient texts and Classical scholars as her primary sources, the reader should acknowledge that Reif's personal agenda clearly comes through in her retelling. Choosing which evidence to prioritize, Reif justifies her exclusion of rape from the myth.

³⁸ Reif makes it sound as if Ovid first introduced rape into the Persephone myth. The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* predates Ovid's writing by 5-7 centuries.

³⁹ Reif, 22.

⁴⁰ Reif, x-xi.

She outright identifies her primary textual sources, the research involved, and admits her own artistic choices. The literary sources for Neo-paganism include ancient texts (in this case, a Homeric Hymn, the Orphic Hymns, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*); scholars' commentaries on the ancient texts and analyses of archaeological evidence; and often Robert Graves' poetry.⁴¹ Jennifer Reif, Charlene Spretnak, and other Neo-pagan authors incorporate feminism into their approach to the above named textual sources. A professed contact with the deities and the author's creative innovation also participate in the outcome of each author's retelling. A popular feminist sensibility frees the author to rewrite the text as she pleases, in order to bring female characters to the center and to attribute agency to them.

While Reif emphasizes her reliance on the ancient texts and classical studies scholarship, she does not defend at length her choice to exclude rape. She writes merely that, in *this version* (read: *Reif's* version), "'Stealing the bride,' or *klepsigamia*, takes place without rape."⁴² Many classicists, and particularly feminist classicists, have worked with the ancient texts in their historical contexts and have read agency into Persephone's descent (because of the pomegranate and narcissus). Reif acknowledges that certain ancient narratives depict the union of Persephone and Hades as a rape scene. However, in responding theologically, Reif rejects those versions that include rape:

The rape of Persephone as a part of the myth most probably did not have its origin in Eleusis. We think of Persephone as being abducted against her will, primarily because of two literary works (and their descendants). These are the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, attributed to the Greek, Homer, possibly ninth to seventh century B.C.E. and *Death and Proserpina* by the Roman, Ovid (43 B.C.E.-17 C.E.). Homer says that the Maiden was seized and carried off unwillingly⁴³, while Ovid says that the Underworld God "ravished" her and that she wept for the loss of her virginity.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Graves, Robert. *The Greek Myths*. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1957 and *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, Inc., 1948.

⁴² Reif, 22.

⁴³ *Homer* probably did not write the Homeric *Hymn*. Homer was doubtfully even one person.

⁴⁴ Reif, 55-56.

Reif's assertion that we only think of Persephone as an object of violence because of the *Hymn* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is problematic because there are no ancient texts that tell Persephone's story without the rape. The two literary works she mentions have had irreversible influence over retellings of the myth until the feminist Neo-pagan movement. But, they have had this influence because they are ancient versions that agree with other ancient sources (Apollodorus, Callimachus, and the Orphic Hymns). The Homeric *Hymn* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are not farfetched versions, as Reif imagines. Reif's *exclusion* of the rape is unusual; she misrepresents the reality of the ancient texts to cover up her reformation of the myth.

Reif even reports a source incorrectly. Reif writes:

In the Orphic hymns, there is no mention of abduction or rape. The "Hymn to Persephone" [Orphic hymn 29] makes no reference to it, while the "Hymn to Plouton" [Orphic hymn 18] states only that the God took Demeter's Daughter away from the meadow to make her his bride. Apollodorus (first to second century C.E.) states that Persephone was secretly carried off, but does not claim rape.⁴⁵

In actuality, both Orphic Hymns Reif cites make *direct* references to Hades' abduction of Persephone. Orphic Hymn 29 addresses Persephone, "You were made a kidnapper's bride in the fall, / and you alone are life and death to toiling mortals, / O Persephone, for you always nourish all and kill them, too."⁴⁶ The Orphic Hymn pays homage to Persephone as a loving and ferocious ruler, but acknowledges her as a kidnapper's bride. Reif deceives her audience. The Orphic Hymns are a lesser known source, even for classicists. Because of the Hymns' obscurity, Reif may rest assured that most readers will not check her

⁴⁵ Reif, 56.

⁴⁶ Orphic Hymn 29, lines 14-16, in Athanassakis' translation, 43. The Greek reads, "αρπαγίμαια λεχη μετοπωρινα νυμφευθειςα" (line 14). *Αρπαγίμαια* comes from the root verb *αρπαζειν*, the same I translated as *to rape*, *to seize*, or *to capture* in Chapter One. The Orphic Hymns are a collection of devotional hymns, each addressing one deity. Scholars' estimations of the Orphic Hymns' dates vary, but they are significantly later than the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, again falsifying Reif's claim. Classicists associate these Hymns with the Orphic tradition (Athanakis, "Introduction," vii-xiii).

claim. She distorts the Orphic Hymns to convince her readers that Hades does not always rape Persephone in the ancient material.

Not surprisingly, Orphic Hymn 18 also reports Hades' rape of Persephone, "Euboulos [Good Counselor], you once took pure Demeter's daughter as your bride / when you tore her away from the meadow and through the sea / upon your steeds you carried her to an Attic cave, / in the district of Eleusis, where the gates to Hades are."⁴⁷ The Orphic Hymn's wording indicates violence. Furthermore, Reif's interpretation of Apollodorus, that Hades carried off Persephone but did not rape her, disagrees with the rape scene as I defined it in Chapter One. Although Apollodorus does not provide graphic details of sexual violence, his inclusion of the verb *αρπαζειν* and the subsequent marriage qualify the scene as a rape because Hades commits an act of sexually motivated violence. Reif proposes that the Orphic Hymns and Apollodorus' *The Library* are not texts about rape. But, she lacks a philologist's accuracy. She does not place fair weight on the verb *αρπαζειν* and its violence because she wants to make Hades a loving partner.

Jennifer Reif's Narrative

Reif sets her story in an idyllic, pastoral scene on Earth. Demeter labors "on the broad and fertile Rharian plain," while maidens (the daughters of Oceanus) and Kore play gaily "on the verdant meadow of Nysa."⁴⁸ The characters at the onset of the narrative are all female; the scene particularly innocent, playful, and carefree. Reif's version resembles the Homeric *Hymn* in this beginning. However, Reif's version differs from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the Homeric *Hymn* in that Persephone (or arguably Hecate, via her magic) invites Hades into the plot. Reif writes:

⁴⁷ Orphic hymn 18, lines 11-15, in Athanassakis' translation, 29. The Greek reads:

"Ευβουλ, αγνοπαλου Δημητερος ος ποτε παιδα / νυμφευσας λειμωνος αποσπαδιην δια ποντου..." (lines 12-13).

⁴⁸ Reif, 22.

As they [the daughters of Oceanus] slept, saffron-cloaked Hecate approached them. With the power of her immortal hand, a spell was laid upon the sleeping maidens. Whispering into the ear of Kore, she caused visions of the lands below to enter her dreams. She charged Kore to see what was transpiring in the dark of the Underworld, in Tartarus. And this is what Demeter's Daughter saw.

A great king was below, downcast and weeping in loneliness. On a throne of carved black marble, he sat in shadow, bent over as one who is forlorn and lost. Beside him was an empty throne. Upon it lay a jeweled silver crown. King Plouton, whose name means wealth, then began to sing. Low and ominous, the song bespoke such yearning that all of the souls below began to mourn with him. These sounds rose up to the very gates of Tartarus, even to the cavern of Eleusis. Plouton sang and sang, until his deep and haunting sounds found the ear of fair Kore.⁴⁹

Reif builds up to the meeting between Persephone and Hades. She introduces each character slowly and, especially important, invites sympathy for Hades, *the lonely Lord of the Underworld*. Because Reif assigns Persephone and Hades unique personal backgrounds and an emotional core from which they then act, Reif creates a love story between two consenting individuals.

In Reif's version, Persephone first interacts with Hades through a psychic vision, through which Persephone witnesses Hades in his lonely state, comes to know his genuine and noble character, and falls for him:

And in her dream, the Maiden Kore saw that the Lord of the Underworld could see her sleeping on the plains of Nysa far above. Kore saw his sadness, as well as his princely bearing. Her heart was flooded with love and compassion for the one who has been called the Unseen One⁵⁰. Her heart had awakened, it had opened to the Lord of Tartarus. Now her only wish was to join him, and to bring light and beauty to that dark place. She wished to bring him the essence of the Sun and of all the beautiful flowers that she had known in the bright world above. And she wished to bless the souls of the dead as well.⁵¹

Hades and Persephone do not meet physically face to face until after this vision. Although the circumstance is a magical encounter, the main difference between Reif's version and the ancient

⁴⁹ Reif, 24.

⁵⁰ The "Unseen One" is a literal translation of the name Aidoneus.

⁵¹ Reif, 24. Both Reif and Spretnak include Persephone's desire to bless the dead spirits as at least one factor in her decision to descend. I will discuss this theme in Spretnak's retelling in Chapter IV.

narratives is that Hades and Persephone both *premeditate* and mutually desire to meet physically. Prior to Reif or any modern retelling, the initial encounter between Hades and Persephone is violent, premeditated by Hades and Zeus alone, and unsuspected completely by Persephone and Demeter.

Reif describes a developing romance between Kore and Hades and emphasizes the anticipation on both parts prior to their physical meeting, “Kore still dreamed. And in her dream, the Lord of the Dark called her by the name Persephone.⁵² Hearing the name, the Maiden stirred in her sleep. She awoke to find Hecate beside her and the daughters of Oceanus still asleep on their fine woolen beds.”⁵³ Kore then awakes from the dream, and Hecate continues to guide Kore towards a meeting with Hades.

She [Kore] awoke to find Hecate beside her and the daughters of Oceanus still asleep on their fine woolen beds. Hecate again raised her divine hand and, across the dry meadow of Nysa, there appeared flame. The poppies shone a deep blood-red before they were extinguished in the holy fire. And beyond the red and glittering flame, the Earth burst asunder. Great mounds of earth spewed out as the black stallions of Tartarus entered the world that had not borne them. The field became burning ember and flame and, beyond the field, the God of the Underworld drew up his chariot and waited.⁵⁴

Reif creates a dramatic scene. The natural world responds to Hades’ and Persephone’s anticipation. Their meeting is clearly a cosmic event. Reif adds sparks and flame to highlight the importance of the god and goddess’s union. In Reif’s version, Hades *waits* for Persephone, which he certainly never does in the ancient tales. Reif continues to embellish Persephone’s passion, while maintaining a fear present in the ancient versions:

Hecate raised Kore from the ground, as fear and courage awoke together in the Maiden’s heart. Terror held her, but, in facing the unknown, she was steadfast. She removed the crown of poppies from her head and, with surety, cast it into the remaining flame. Her gaze was fixed upon the face of her beloved and, uncrowned, she walked across the field

⁵² Reif’s version is similar to the Homeric *Hymn* in that Kore becoming Persephone marks an internal change in the goddess.

⁵³ Reif, 25.

⁵⁴ Reif, 25.

of ember and flame to descend with the Lord of the Dark. Her veil, embroidered with lilies, was left behind.⁵⁵

Persephone feels terror because she faces the unknown. Reif makes use of classicists' traditional interpretation that the rape represents a rite of passage, but Reif writes away the rape itself. In this way, Reif is able to tell a story about a girl's initiation into womanhood *and* the romance between god and goddess. In this manner, Reif reaches a similar conclusion as feminist classicists: that Persephone undergoes a difficult initiatory trial; but Reif skips the major step in Persephone's transformation, the rape.

The most simple yet significant comment on Reif's rendering of the rape scene is that it is *not* a rape scene. Reif includes elements of a rite of passage into womanhood (the terror on page 25), which is usually the most optimistic conclusion a feminist classicist will read into the ancient mythical abduction scene. It is interesting that Reif, although she dismisses the interpretive steps between rape and empowering initiation, still makes use of a feminist classicist final conclusion. Reif appreciates the notion that Persephone comes into power via her union with Hades, but Reif chooses to exclude any hint of rape as a prerequisite for the growthful transformation into womanhood. Reif eliminates any hint of rape in her retelling for obvious reasons. Reif, a modern American woman, feels a spiritual connection to Persephone. She wrote *Mysteries of Demeter* as a religious manual to assist individuals or groups to worship Demeter and Persephone, the Two Goddesses. Reif approaches the myth of Persephone, seeking spiritual fulfillment, while classicists and philologists report ancient history and literature. Because she has already decided on her end goal, Reif shapes the ancient myth in order to fit her morals and interests.

⁵⁵ Reif, 25. Reif's veil signals that Persephone sheds virginity, innocence, girlhood, or all three. The veil may function similarly to the narcissus in the Homeric *Hymn*.

IV. THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO CHARLENE SPRETNAK

Charlene Spretnak's Retelling

Charlene Spretnak has been active in the Goddess spirituality movement since the 1970s. She published *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre-Hellenic Myths* in 1978 and four years later received an M.A. in English from the University of California, Berkeley. Spretnak has continued to write about feminist spirituality and ecofeminism and holds a position at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, an alternative academic institution.⁵⁶ Spretnak edited *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* in 1982, which includes essays by Marija Gimbutas, Starhawk, Carol Christ, Mary Daly, and Robin Morgan⁵⁷, and most recently published *Missing Mary: The Queen of Heaven and Her Re-Emergence in the Modern Church*. Besides her work in religion and feminism, Spretnak is well known for her involvement with the Green Party. Spretnak is a theorist, creative writer, social activist, and teacher.

In *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre-Hellenic Myths*, retells several Greek myths. Spretnak's myths differ from the traditional myths because she consistently makes a goddess, or multiple goddesses, the protagonist(s) of each. Spretnak claims that, in doing so, she captures the truest essence of these myths, for, in her opinion, the recorded Classical myths are Hellenized replacements of matrifocal, "pre-Hellenic" myths. Spretnak admits that she has written this set of myths, but assures her reader that she reconstructs a long-lost matrifocal tradition accurately.

Spretnak's belief in a pre-Hellenic mythology that placed goddesses at the center defines her entire approach to the Persephone myth. Spretnak's final chapter is "Demeter and Persephone," in which

⁵⁶ CIIS offers M.A. degrees in East-West Psychology, Transformative Leadership, Integrative Health Studies, Cultural Anthropology and Social Transformation, and other uncommon degree programs.

⁵⁷ Spretnak, Charlene. *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1982.

she includes historical background on ancient Demeter worship, commentary on the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, and “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone.” The reader should notice the similarities between Spretnak’s compilation and Reif’s many sections in *Mysteries of Demeter: Rebirth of the Pagan Way*. Reif and Spretnak both include historical information about ancient religion and their own retellings of the myths. As I expressed in the previous chapter, this combination is a common technique in Neo-pagan literature. The historical sections ground the practitioner in a religious tradition with lineage.

In accordance with her emphasis on the goddesses, Spretnak chooses to embellish the relationship between Demeter and Persephone. Hades never even enters Spretnak’s tale. This exclusion immediately sets her version apart from every ancient written account of the myth. Yet, Spretnak justifies this move by her belief in pre-Hellenic mythology. Not a tale about rape or male violence in any way, Spretnak’s version is the story of a loving daughter, who grows up and makes choices on her own, but preserves her strong bond with her mother. Spretnak simultaneously tells of a mother who, with difficulty, releases her no longer necessary tight grip on her daughter. Persephone does undergo the traditional initiatory pattern because she faces the unknown and descends to the Underworld. But, she does so completely of her own accord. Persephone even challenges Demeter’s authority when she decides to take this step. Persephone’s volition contradicts the usual forceful abduction.

Spretnak begins the tale with a description of Persephone and Demeter’s life together on Earth. Demeter grants fertility for the land, while Persephone takes delight in the youthful plants and flowers. Demeter and Persephone are content, their lives steady and peaceful. Persephone becomes restless, though, and feels a calling towards something new. She confesses to Demeter:

Mother, sometimes in my wanderings I have met the spirits of the dead hovering around their earthly homes and sometimes the mortals, too, can see them in the dark of the moon by the light of their fires and torches.

There are those spirits who drift about restlessly, but they mean no harm.

I spoke to them, Mother. They seem confused and many do not even understand their own state. Is there no one in the netherworld who received the newly dead?⁵⁸

Spretnak includes Demeter's response:

Demeter sighed and answered softly, *It is I who has domain over the underworld. From beneath the surface of the earth I draw forth the crops and the wild plants. And in pits beneath the surface of the earth I have instructed the mortals to store My seed from harvest until sowing, in order that contact with the spirits of My underworld will fertilize the seed. Yes, I know very well the realm of the dead, but My most important work is here. I must feed the living.*⁵⁹

Demeter's response to Persephone is significant because, in it, she assumes domain over the realm usually assigned to Hades. The ancient texts never give Demeter any control of the Underworld. In the Homeric *Hymn* and other ancient versions, Persephone's descent into the Underworld marks Demeter's loss of control in her daughter's life *because* the Underworld is outside of her domain. In Spretnak's passage, Demeter explains the symbiotic relationship between her function on Earth (fertility) and her association with the dead spirits. Although Demeter is responsible for the Underworld and the dead spirits, she chooses to dwell above ground because she believes her work on Earth is most important. After hearing the spirits' calls, Persephone disagrees that the dead spirits should live alone in the Underworld, without a divine presence, "Persephone rolled over and thought about the ghostly spirits She had seen, about their faces drawn with pain and bewilderment."⁶⁰ Persephone then decides to go to the dead.

When Persephone expresses her intent to Demeter, the two share an emotional scene. Demeter feels troubled by Persephone's will:

⁵⁸ Spretnak, 111-12.

⁵⁹ Spretnak, 112.

⁶⁰ Spretnak, 113.

Demeter abruptly sat upright as a chill passed through Her and rustled the grass around Them. She was speechless for a moment, but then hurriedly began recounting all the pleasures they enjoyed in Their world of sunshine, warmth, and fragrant flowers. She told Her Daughter of the dark gloom of the underworld and begged Her to reconsider.

Persephone sat up and hugged her Mother and rocked Her with silent tears. For a long while They held each other, radiating rainbow auras of love and protection. Yet Persephone's response was unchanged.⁶¹

Spretnak's scene conveys several emotions in quick succession: Demeter's desire to hold on to her daughter, the love both feel for each other, Persephone's nurturing approach of her mother, and Persephone's strong will. Persephone has reached the age when she will make decisions on her own. Persephone respects her mother's feelings, but she knows what she must do for her own peace of mind. At first reluctant, Demeter finally recognizes Persephone as the mature adult she has become and understands that she must let go.

The scene Spretnak describes, with its emphasis on Persephone and Demeter's reciprocally nourishing relationship, resembles one from the Homeric *Hymn*, when the goddesses reunite after Persephone's initial journey to the Underworld, "Then all day long, their minds at one, they soothed / each other's heart and soul in many ways, / embracing fondly, and their spirits abandoned grief, / as they gave and received joy between them."⁶² In this sense, Spretnak captures one theme from the Homeric *Hymn*, but she drops the significant theme of Persephone's violent initiation. After Persephone comforts her mother and conveys her conviction, Demeter lets Persephone go, "Very well. You are loving and giving and We cannot give only to Ourselves. I understand why You must go. Still, You are My Daughter and for every day that You remain in the underworld, I will mourn Your absence."⁶³ It is

⁶¹ Spretnak, 113.

⁶² HHymn, lines 434-39.

⁶³ Spretnak, 114.

difficult for Demeter to see her daughter leave the nest, but the mother and daughter have a relationship of mutual respect. After an initial protest, Demeter accepts Persephone's will.

Persephone enters the Underworld thus:

In the crook of Her arm Persephone held Her Mother's grain close to Her breast, while Her other arm held the torch aloft. She was startled by the chill as She descended, but She was not afraid. Deeper and deeper into the darkness She continued, picking Her way slowly along the rocky path. For many hours She was surrounded only by silence. Gradually She became aware of a low moaning sound. It grew in intensity until She rounded a corner and entered an enormous cavern, where thousands of spirits of the dead milled about aimlessly, hugging themselves, shaking their heads, and moaning in despair.⁶⁴

Upon her arrival, the goddess announces, "I am Persephone and I have come to be your Queen. Each of you has left your earthly body and now resides in the realm of the dead. If you come to Me, I will initiate you into your new world."⁶⁵ The pomegranate appears in Spretnak's myth, but, here, Persephone uses the pomegranate seeds to consecrate the spirits of the dead, "She reached for a few of the pomegranate seeds, squeezing them between Her fingers. She painted the forehead with a broad swatch of the red juice and slowly pronounced: / *You have waxed into the fullness of life / And waned into darkness; / May you be renewed in tranquility and wisdom.*"⁶⁶ The pomegranate seed remains a symbol of initiation, but Spretnak alters the parties involved. Persephone *initiates* the dead spirits, over which she will now rule as Queen, whereas Hades usually initiates Persephone into sexuality. Again, Spretnak maintains a theme from the ancient myth, but changes the context. Spretnak claims to recreate the *original myth*, the pre-Hellenic myth. Yet, no evidence supports Spretnak's inventions.

Spretnak concludes her version with a joyful reunion scene between Demeter and Persephone. Persephone returns from the Underworld to her place of origin, where Demeter waits. The goddesses

⁶⁴ Spretnak, 114-15.

⁶⁵ Spretnak, 115.

⁶⁶ Spretnak, 116.

“ran to each other and hugged and cried and laughed and hugged and danced and danced and danced.”⁶⁷

Spretnak then reports that each year mortals experience winter during Persephone’s stay in the Underworld and spring when she returns. Clearly, Spretnak has chosen to place Persephone and Demeter at the center of the myth. The other characters are the spirits and mortals; not one has a name or an personal identity. The Homeric *Hymn* develops Demeter’s character, including her grief at Persephone’s disappearance and her joy at their reunion. But, Spretnak misses the heart of the narrative because she does not include the rape scene. Spretnak underestimates Demeter’s desperation and reverses Persephone’s initiation.

According to Spretnak, Persephone experienced a “chill as She descended [to the Underworld], but She was not afraid.”⁶⁸ Persephone’s lack of fear directly contradicts the emotion the ancient authors rightly attributed to her. In Spretnak’s tale, Persephone feels a personal calling and follows it. She descends to the Underworld to serve the dead as their divine Queen. In that Persephone’s descent marks her first significant personal decision, the tale includes traces of Persephone’s maturation into adulthood (usually indicated by the rape scene). But, Spretnak only allows Persephone to mature under benign conditions. Spretnak leaves out the violent nature of Persephone’s transition, which classicists have found to be so meaningful. Spretnak ignores this piece of the myth in order to present a lovely, peaceful story. Spretnak includes little conflict and little pain. While Spretnak might find her tale pleasant, it fails to capture the intense emotions of the Homeric *Hymn*.

Commentary on Spretnak

I can best describe Charlene Spretnak’s retelling of the myth of Persephone as the meeting of two religious myths. The most obvious myth is that of Persephone’s descent. The myth that crosses

⁶⁷ Spretnak, 118.

⁶⁸ Spretnak, 114.

Persephone's descent in Spretnak's retelling is a modern myth about the ancient world. This myth is a tale common in contemporary Goddess spirituality and Neo-pagan literature: *the myth of matriarchy and patriarchal invasion*. For a concise explanation of matriarchy theory, I turn to my definition in an earlier work:

Throughout this essay, I refer to *matriarchy theory*, which includes the following ideas: (1) Before patriarchy, there was matriarchy. (2) Most or all prehistoric cultures were matrifocal, and all peoples worshipped a universal Mother Goddess. (3) Matriarchal cultures were egalitarian and peaceful. (4) In matriarchal societies, men and women were valued equally. Men and women may have had separate roles, but society recognized the equal need for both roles. (5) Patriarchal tribes invaded matriarchal cultures, overthrew matriarchal rule, and replaced Goddess with a pantheon of deities, consistently headed by a male god (such as Zeus).⁶⁹

Social theorists and scholars developed matriarchy theory in the 20th century; the theory then became popular among feminist academics and other well educated women and developed further alongside the Goddess spirituality movement.⁷⁰ An academic *idea*, a scholars' belief about ancient history, became a central religious myth in a new religious movement. Matriarchy theory has since lost popularity among academics.

Spretnak's belief in an ancient matriarchy fuels her retelling of Persephone's descent. The defining point of matriarchy theory that most directly enables Spretnak's interpretation is the fifth characteristic I listed: those who believe in matriarchy theory attribute mythic rapes to the interaction between matrifocal society and patriarchal tribes. Supposedly, the invading warrior tribes impose upon

⁶⁹ I presented my essay, "How Matriarchy Theory Functions as Feminist Mythology in the Goddess Spirituality Movement," at the Geis Student Research on Women Conference, April 9, 2005. The passage above is on page 3 of the document. Matriarchy actually has a long history in Western literature, Marxist social theory, and academic writing before feminists even began to write about matriarchy and the Goddess. See Eller, Cynthia. *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000: chapter 3 and Davis, Philip G. *Goddess Unmasked*. Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1998 for a comprehensive analysis of matriarchy theory's evolution.

⁷⁰ J.J. Bachofen first presented matriarchy theory in the 20th century. Social theorist Frederick Engels later incorporated the idea of a matrifocal past in his work. Social anthropologist James George Frazer popularized matriarchy theory in the 1920s, and classicist Jane Ellen Harrison applied it to the Greek world also in the early twentieth century. Archaeologist Marija Gimbutas argued for a matriarchal past throughout "Old Europe," starting in the mid-1970s.

the myths already existent in a matrifocal, Goddess-oriented society. The literary sources with rape, then, that have been passed down to the modern day all reflect local patriarchal invasions. Spretnak explains Hades' rape of Persephone as one example of the many prehistoric myths supposedly transformed by an historical event, the patriarchal invasion. This invasion, unfortunately for Spretnak, is just as much a myth as the story of Persephone's descent.

Hades does not even exist in Spretnak's version because she believes the *original* myth ("pre-Hellenic," in Spretnak's terms) was the story of the Two Goddesses; Hades is only a character in *patriarchal* versions of the original myth, and the rape is absolutely a corruption to the story, which mirrors an actual invading culture's rape of a peaceful, matrifocal society. A scholarly theory (that only later was discredited) and an ancient tale of divinities meet in Spretnak's retelling.

Despite its historical problems, Spretnak's moment of "societal shift from matrifocal to patriarchal"⁷¹ is a key feature of her reading of Demeter and Persephone. Accepting the patriarchal invasion as fact has been the most direct and convenient means by which spiritual feminists and Neopagans have avoided the problem of rape. By claiming that the texts available reflect the new patriarchal order, feminist women have reclaimed Demeter and Persephone for themselves. Matriarchy theory aligns the timing of the patriarchal invasion with the moment of recording the myth in writing. The texts then become negligible for the spiritual feminist who believes in prehistoric matriarchy. Consequently, Persephone and Demeter must have existed in other forms prior to the patriarchal invasion and the accompanying intervention of patriarchal ideas onto the Persephone myth (according to matriarchy theory).

⁷¹ Spretnak, 107.

Those who argue for pre-patriarchal matrifocal society locate such civilizations in prehistory. Doing so enables a liberal analysis. Because the spiritual feminists have no written documentation from their Golden Age (by definition, *prehistory* corresponds with the era before writing), they may use their imagination quite freely in recreating Persephone and Demeter and projecting these images onto the prehistoric age. According to Spretnak, Persephone, in her true, authentic form, is not a rape victim. We have come to know Persephone as a rape victim only because of the “late” patriarchal versions (and all following retellings based on the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* and Ovid). Spretnak, like Reif, easily dismisses centuries of retellings that involve rape. Yet, no ancient written account of the myth does *not* include the abduction scene.

The belief that this matristic society revolved around oral, not literary, tradition accompanies the matriarchy myth. Supposedly, writing became important after the patriarchal invasion. This idea helps explain to the intended audience why the remaining ancient texts all include the rape of Persephone and assist the spiritual feminist author in ignoring the theological problem of rape. A religious myth involving rape accompanies patriarchal society. Writing also accompanies patriarchal society. Thus, texts of rape are natural products of a once matrifocal society recently transformed by a violent incoming patriarchal tribe. This explanation acts as a fundamental religious myth in the women’s spirituality and Neo-pagan movement.

Identifying the prior matriarchy as an oral culture and later patriarchal society as literate provides a simple explanation for textual sources about rape, which Reif, Spretnak, and other spiritual feminists, do not want in their canon. This myth or historical theory, which developed significantly within the American women’s movement from the 1970s until now, is not without its problems. Both critics outside the feminist movement and feminist critics from within have questioned the validity and

usefulness of the matriarchy myth because of its essentialist nature.⁷² The myth, as many have pointed out, attributes creativity to women and analytic thought to men. It then runs the risk of reinforcing biological sex-based determinism onto men and women, thereby undermining feminist objectives. Ironically, spiritual feminist *authors* and feminist *academics*, those who should take pride in their literary skills, are among those who stand most firmly behind the myth of the ancient matrifocal, oral culture. Their ideas very much reflect the line of feminist thought in which they take part.

The American Goddess spirituality movement has historically been tied to a feminism that advocates *womanhood* as an ultimately positive source. In her essay, “Reading Ovid’s Rapes,” classicist Amy Richlin explains well the difference between “equality/sameness” feminism and the feminist thought that influenced the Goddess spirituality movement:

...whereas a long tradition in Western thought held that women were essentially different from men and inferior to them (Aristotle, Aquinas, Freud), and some feminists countered this by arguing for the equality/sameness of women and men, other feminists countered by arguing that women are essentially different from men and superior to them (Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich). These feminist essentialists stress qualities like nurturance, warmth, kindness as inherently female.⁷³

Richlin describes differences early on in the 1970s feminist movement that have continued to cause contention. Richlin’s distinction between “equality/sameness” feminism and “feminist essentialism” lies at the heart of the debate over the matriarchy myth’s worth. The assumed positive value of womanhood characterizes much women’s spirituality literature. This political belief served a very important use in the 1970s, when many women were entering male-dominated professional fields. Having faith in

⁷² For feminist arguments against matriarchy theory, see Eller, Cynthia. *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000 and Binford, Sally R. “Myths and Matriarchies.” In *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality*. Edited by Charlene Spretnak. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1982. For a critique from outside the feminist movement, see Davis, Philip G. *Goddess Unmasked*. Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1998.

⁷³ Richlin, Amy. “Reading Ovid’s Rapes.” In *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*. Edited by Amy Richlin. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, 276. Eller (1993) makes the same distinction between equality feminism and radical spiritual feminism.

womanhood as a real, substantive category strengthened many women's confidence in themselves and empowered them to challenge patriarchal institutions and make change. Now that women have made significant progress in many fields, a radical feminist essentialism has fallen out of favor, and rightfully so. I disagree entirely that we have reached the post-patriarchy some claim we have attained. But, since the 1970s women have made great changes in professional fields. Feminist mythology, in order to accurately mirror the current age and current problems, must reform.

The reader should now acknowledge how politicized Spretnak's use of the Persephone myth is. While she most likely did believe in the myth of matriarchy, the myth was attractive because of the political power it allowed women. Envisioning a lost past, in which women made decisions about political order, defined social values, and controlled economy, women in the 1970s felt inspired and strove to recreate a similar, peaceful, egalitarian society free of sexism. It was much more important to Charlene Spretnak to inspire women in this way than to adhere to the original Greek myth. Despite Spretnak's claims to preserve the "original," pre-Hellenic myth, her political interest and her role as a feminist religious leader and activist, in the end, outweigh her conviction to preserve ancient mythology. One should recognize Spretnak's text for what it is, a product of a 1970s spiritual feminist movement, not as an accurate reconstruction of an ancient Greek or pre-Hellenic myth. Spretnak's tale much more clearly demonstrates the values of the modern political feminist movement than any symbolism contained in the original myth, as philologists and classicists know it.

Despite Spretnak's liberal use of the myth, she discusses its authenticity and its compatibility with the original, pre-Hellenic myth. Spretnak's presentation of her text as a researched work is an important aspect of Neo-pagan literature. Spretnak falls short of a scholarly investigation⁷⁴, but her

⁷⁴ On page 24, Spretnak states that she could have provided academic footnotes for every symbol in her retellings, but did not because they would distract the reader, "Every symbol, feat, or location associated with the various Goddesses in the myths is

readers, most of whom are not scholars of the Classical period, will feel comfortable connecting to the Goddesses spiritually because they trust her historical account. Origin stories are always important in religious communities. As practitioners of a new religious movement, Neo-pagans are often sensitive surrounding issues of origin. Claims about ancient religion that appear well researched will comfort a Neo-pagan. Spretnak's footnotes, although minor to an academic researcher, function as sufficient credentials for her intended audience.

The date of Spretnak's text may concern the reader as we compare Spretnak's method to Reif's and attempt to conclude about feminist Neo-pagan tendencies. In a more recent essay, "Beyond the Backlash: An Appreciation of the Work of Marija Gimbutas," found in a larger anthology dedicated to the late archaeologist, Spretnak defends Gimbutas' original publications.⁷⁵ Spretnak's conviction for and faith in the theory of a matrifocal past and patriarchal invasion has changed little between 1978 and 1997. Together, *Lost Goddesses in Early Greece* and Spretnak's essay in 1997 demonstrate both how important matriarchy theory was in the initial stages of the Goddess spirituality movement and how much it has remained a foundational religious myth. Those in the Neo-pagan and Goddess spirituality movements disagree about the myth's historical accuracy.

Spretnak represents a more extremist theological position than many in the movement. Margot Adler, journalist for National Public Radio, Wiccan priestess, and author of *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, recently acknowledged the matriarchy myth's historical problems and the need for Neo-pagans and spiritual feminists to think

based on firm evidence. That is to say, the myths could be footnoted as heavily as are the research introductions, but I felt that such intrusions would violate the artistic integrity of the sacred stories."

⁷⁵ Spretnak, Charlene. "Beyond the Backlash: An Appreciation of the Work of Marija Gimbutas." In *From the Realm of the Ancestors: An Anthology in Honor of Marija Gimbutas*. Edited by Joan Marler. Manchester, CT: Knowledge, Ideas & Trends, Inc., 1997, 399-405.

critically about their histories and mythologies.⁷⁶ Spretnak is not the most influential author for Neopagans and spiritual feminists, but her work is a good example of a large literary corpus that still preserves matriarchy theory. Spretnak continues to teach at the Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness Department at the California Institute of Integral Studies, to publish ecofeminist theory, and to speak at women's spirituality gatherings.

Spretnak claims to retell the myth of Persephone and Demeter more accurately or truly than those following the supposed patriarchal texts have. In order to retell the myth, Spretnak relies on Jane Ellen Harrison's, Gunther Zuntz', and Marija Gimbutas' historical arguments more than she relies on any versions of the myth itself.⁷⁷ This practice is, as I have demonstrated, in line with her belief about history and the social factors behind the written texts. Without the written versions, however, there is no other record of the *myth* for a modern woman to retell. The historical fiction embedded in Spretnak's retelling of the Persephone myth is of far greater importance than the myth itself. Spretnak does not translate the myth, capturing its original meaning or symbolism. She uses the characters Persephone and Demeter, the symbol of the pomegranate, and the thematic descent to the Underworld; reconfigures the relationship between all these; adds imaginative historical theory; and stirs.

In the end, Spretnak winds up with light reading. She identifies patriarchal influences onto the "original" myth and excuses them as corruptions. Spretnak joins many other spiritual feminists in ignoring areas in the ancient texts, where rich theological work, and particularly *feminist* theology, could be done. Spretnak may be on to something great when she states the ancient texts clearly mirror a

⁷⁶ Adler, Margot. "Inner Space: The Spiritual Frontier." In *Sisterhood is Forever: The Women's Anthology for a New Millennium*. Edited by Robin Morgan. New York: Washington Square Press, 2003, 551-59.

⁷⁷ Jane Ellen Harrison is an important figure in women's history within classical studies. A British woman writing in the early twentieth century, she was a successful, well-respected classicist before women regularly contributed to the field. Gunther Zuntz published *Persephone: Three Essays on Religion and Thought in Magna Graecia* in 1971. Zuntz did include ideas of a prehistoric matriarchy in his work.

patriarchal society. Now that scholars have discredited matriarchy theory, I naturally wish to ask Spretnak and her colleagues, *What if society never was matrifocal?* If the ancients sanctified a god's rape of a goddess, ancient Greek religion should be less attractive to the modern feminist. In the ancient texts, Persephone never existed without Hades. If Neo-pagans are to continue claiming lineage to ancient religious traditions, I anticipate they must soon reform their opinions of prehistory and begin further theological work. In order to re-collect respect from historians and philologists, who study the ancient world and its literature, Neo-pagans must either shed themselves of their false historical claims or take the ancient texts as serious theological sources. Neo-pagans' response to the historical problems in their own literature will shape the religious movement's future.

V. CONCLUSION

Jennifer Reif and Charlene Spretnak create stories very different from each other and equally different from the ancient texts. Taking opposite stands on Hades' and Persephone's relationship, Reif and Spretnak respond to the same problem and, at heart, in the same way. Reif creates a heterosexual romance between equal partners; Spretnak tells a story about a mother and daughter. Both tell the myth in this manner in order to write away a god's rape of a goddess. Reif and Spretnak might satisfy their readers initially, but if those readers do further investigation into the ancient myth, they might be disappointed that Reif's and Spretnak's versions misrepresent an originally harsh storyline.

Jennifer Reif and Charlene Spretnak, the Neo-pagan authors, wish to present modern women with an image of Persephone that will benefit them as women, should they identify with her and worship her as a real divine presence. Because Persephone will become a model for these women, Reif and Spretnak ascribe to Persephone qualities that agree with their own feminist ideologies, their ideas of

what a healthy notion of womanhood constitutes. In order to accomplish this, Reif and Spretnak choose to expel any hint of rape from their versions. Had Reif and Spretnak kept the rape motif in their retellings, they would have subjected their readers and religious followers to an unpleasant religious myth and a theology of a rapist god and a raped goddess. Reif and Spretnak prefer a story that covers up the reality that women are often the objects of male sexual violence. They prefer to edit out a violent rape scene and tell *nice* stories.

Classicist Amy Richlin, in her essay “Reading Ovid’s Rapes,” highlights several feminist methods of approaching women in literature from a patriarchal society:

Feminist critics advise readers to resist the text (Fetterley 1978), to read against the text, to misread or reread the text (Kolodny 1985), to reject the canon of Western literature and make a new one, or end canons altogether (Fetterley 1986; Kolodny 1985; Showalter 1985: 19-122). Three things to do with a lot of male-based texts: throw them out, take them apart, find female-based ones instead.⁷⁸

Richlin summarizes very well three basic approaches feminist authors and literary theorists have employed. The authors on whom I have chosen to focus, Reif and Spretnak, make use of ancient texts, but they reject that which displeases them. It is significant, however, that Reif and Spretnak both claim that they are not throwing out the canon or creating completely anew.

Feminist classicists and feminist Neo-pagans both respond to mythic rape in some fashion. The feminist classicist may reject the myth as patriarchal entirely; however, women are usually professional classicists because they find value in Classical literature and society. Feminist classicists often wish just as strongly as Neo-pagans to find something valuable (especially messages in line with feminism) in the myths about goddesses. Because a professional classicist may not dismiss the text, it is not surprising that feminist classicists will reach different conclusions about the rape scene than Jennifer Reif.

⁷⁸ Richlin, 161.

Although Reif is invested in ancient religious practice, her ultimate purpose is that of a priestess, not a scholar: to offer a religious tradition to modern women and men and to interpret ancient texts as they pertain usefully to modern readers. A classicist's job, then, is to inform her reader about the ancient world. Reif and classicists have different purposes and will thus use the text in different ways.

Feminist classicists and feminist Neo-pagans often conclude with similar understandings of the goddess Persephone; however, the spiritual feminist and the feminist classicist will reach the same conclusions through some variant and some common means. The authors whose versions I have chosen to analyze in this essay *retell* the myth very creatively, although each claims authenticity, a strong connection to the "original," and an understanding of the myth's "true" meaning.

Feminist classicists, on the other hand, will not disregard the ancient texts. The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are the most significant texts for them, because they are well developed, detailed narratives about Persephone's descent and because the Homeric Hymns and Ovid are major components in the canon of Classical literature. Feminist classicists' commentaries on the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Neo-pagan retellings of the Persephone myth both have feminist objectives. Both feminist classicists and Neo-pagans have an interest in making Persephone a desirable and accessible figure for modern women.

There is irony in feminist Neo-pagans' habit to "look the other way as the god rapes the goddess," given the initial factors that led many women in the 1970s and continue to lead women to leave their families' religious traditions for the Goddess spirituality movement. The Goddess spirituality movement in the 20th century is an altogether different religion than anything practiced in Classical or pre-Hellenic Greece. Ecclesiastical bodies and religious rituals have new forms influenced by current society and political structure, although contemporary people might research ancient congregational

structures and rituals and copy them to some degree. Many women turned to Neo-paganism, actively leaving other religions because of their patriarchal language and ecclesiastical structure. The Goddess, as the majority of feminist Neo-pagans perceive her today, has served as a “safe” alternative to other religious traditions. When one attempts to connect modern Goddess mythology with Classical mythology, the *disconnect* becomes all the more obvious.

As I noted towards the end of the last chapter, Wiccan priestess and journalist Margot Adler has admitted the problems of matriarchy theory. More feminist Neo-pagans in the near future might accept Adler’s call and reflect more critically on their mythology. If Neo-pagans begin checking religious leaders’ historical claims, Neo-paganism could experience what Christianity and Judaism did in the 1970s: a combination of feminist reformation within the tradition (one that deals more directly with Classical mythology) and a mass exodus from it because women might lose faith in a mythology of rapist gods and raped goddesses. Daly, Christ, and Spretnak came to the Greek goddesses because of a need for a woman-positive spiritual tradition. After matriarchy theory has been discredited, spiritual feminists interested in historical accuracy find the very reasons they *came* to the Neo-pagan tradition completely overturned.